

Honored guests and participants, it's so good to be here with you all. A historical moment, if I could. This is a historical moment. The ability of the Alaska Federation of Natives to attract to Kotzebue, the kind of public policy strength that your organization has been able to do is a historical moment. I'd like to remind us all of other historical moments, just this week [George Attla, Jr.] passed, the "Huslia Hustler." I remember George was talking with [Emil Notti – first AFN President in 1966] this morning, that his family and George's family trapped together back in the 1940s. When George contracted Tuberculosis his father took him by dogsled, from the Huslia area to Tanana in the middle of the winter, to the only hospital in this huge, vast area; a small six or seven bed hospital in the town of Tanana. As a result of TB George had his knee fused, and yet as you've seen in the news went on to win more sled dog races, sprint races, than anyone in history.

I'd like to ask Emil Notti and [Willie Hensley – AFN President cir. 1969] if they would stand, please. These are two men that have been mentors and leaders of mine, and of course in this organization, and in Alaska. You can sit down now [to Emil and Willie – laughter]. When we began in the early to mid-60s, we could have a gathering in a room this size and not a single one of us other than Willie with a college degree. And now in a similar size room and with a similar group of people: doctors and lawyers, and accountants, and even a few Indian chiefs still. It's something that we take for granted possibly in this day in age.

But I recall - Willie and Emil - that during ANCSA when the stakes began to grow after Prudhoe Bay was discovered, and possibility of a very large ANCSA settlement became – a possibility – that the Congress wanted to know if Alaska Natives had the ability to manage their own their own affairs, their own resources. Because we were insistent, that in any settlement, that was what was required: that we as Alaska Natives be able to handle our own affairs, our own resources. We were arbiters of our own future. And I recall we had a hard time, when Congress said send us an example of those responsible amongst you, so that we can know that if there is a sizable settlement, you will have the capacity to manage...and I remember discussions Willie and Emil and among those we selected was Cecil Barnes, because Cecil had a mortgage – what is more American and responsible than being in debt? [laughter] And we also took back to Washington, D.C. two Wein Air captains, and their four-striped uniforms. I think one an Inupiaq and another an Athabascan. And...we've come a long way.

I recall when among the most power individuals of our times was the Area Director of the BIA [Bureau of Indian Affairs], with a huge office, even bigger than Governor Walker's. And a man from another world as [you], who made the decisions that affected our lives profoundly. We live in a different time, in another historical moment. We've seen the reemergence of tribes, we've seen relations with the federal government become relationships that allow us to disagree, and allow us to disagree even vehemently. Because we know we are now heard, that our voices matter. There was a time when that was not the case.

I recall being involved with passage of ANILCA [Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act]. A hundred-plus million acres in Alaska in federal classifications taking place in the 1980s was a direct result of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act [ANCSA]. We could not have had ANCSA passed without being held hostage by that statutory requirement. I recall fighting to have areas called “Preserves” at the edges of those huge federal land classifications – areas called Preserves upon which Alaskans could continue the lifestyles and the lives that they had lived for generations. And I have seen since – and *we trusted* those decisions – they were made of course by the Congress and the Administration of the United States.

And over a half a century, less than have a century we have seen our ability to live and to make a life on those lands diminished year by year. I have seen on those Preserves where we were supposed to be allowed to live the lives we have always lived, be taken away. Fish camps burned, hunting camps burned down, and Preserves becoming just in this incredible federal philosophy that somehow if there is a Preserve [here] and Wilderness [here], over time Wilderness accretes and assumes the management of that area *that was promised to us forever*, to allow us to live on those lands that we always had. So there’s where we can have the kinds of conflicts and the kinds of concerns we have with the federal government. But we must always remember that we are also a part of the federal government. We are a state in the Union. And especially in rural Alaska, were it not for the federal government, the things that we enjoy today that make our lives better would not be anywhere near as robust and broad reaching as they are, in housing, in health, in education, in public safety.

So there is always a balance that must be maintained. But the balance, for us, must be built on the notion that our people come first. That is the lives of we and our children, that we will always fight for. And not just in a way that makes them capable of success, and living in a place in a land with leadership that provides broad opportunity. But our people must always be able to know and *live* with a certainty that they will always be able to *be who they are*. And that is Native peoples. Fighting to preserve our language. Fighting to preserve our cultures. Fighting to preserve our traditions with the certain sense that we can pass that along to our children.

Regardless of what the State of Alaska does or the federal government does, if when we celebrate the 100th Anniversary of Alaska Statehood in less than fifty years. If America, the world, and Alaska, can’t look at our own place and say they still live on the land, they still speak their languages, they still have their traditions, they still have their cultures, they *still know who they are*. We will have failed. It will be that certain. We are the ultimate bellwether of Alaska’s future. You cannot build a good society and destroy people and their lives. And we are dedicated to building a good society, in which every Alaska has every opportunity to prosper, but more than anything else an Alaska in which First Peoples, have the opportunity to live their lives, and to be able at a hundred years of the state’s existence, to be able to greet one another, to be able to live in places, to be able to live from the land and its resources in ways that they have done for millennia. So everything that we are engaged as Alaskans, in my judgment, in the determination in

history, will be made on that single point, that Alaska's Native peoples survive and prosper. Thank you. [applause]